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16 Meriden Road
Rockfall
Connecticut 06481-2961
Tele: 860-346-TREE
www.ctwoodlands.org

Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association

Public Hearing Subject Matter	Position
Raised H.B. 5037: AN ACT ADJUSTING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2023.	Support

The Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) is the first nonprofit conservation organization established in Connecticut in 1895. For over 127 years, CFPA has offered testimony before the General Assembly on various State Park and Forest, trail recreation, sustainable forestry, and land conservation issues.

It's important to start by noting that people are getting outdoors to State Parks, Forests, Wildlife Management Areas, and other public lands in record numbers -- State Park attendance alone was reported to be over 13 million visitors in 2021. This increased outdoor recreation provides significant economic benefits to our state. According to the most recent national Bureau of Economic Analysis report, outdoor recreation in Connecticut generated \$3.3 billion in revenue and helped sustain 41,721 jobs in 2020.

To protect the source of so many socioeconomic, mental/physical health, wildlife, and other community benefits, it is critical to invest in Connecticut's outdoors, and the adjusted FY 2023 Budget proposes several important ones:

Enable State's Capacity to Utilize Federal Funds for Connecticut

This budget recognizes that it will take additional people to prudently administer the significant federal funds coming available nationally through the federal American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). Without the additional personnel proposed in the Budget to manage grant programs, conduct due diligence reviews, stay on top of reporting requirements, et cetera, Connecticut might be unable to effectively utilize these funds for public benefit. With this additional staff capacity, we expect DEEP and other state agencies to also be more efficient at dedicating federal funding to on-the-ground projects.

Support Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure

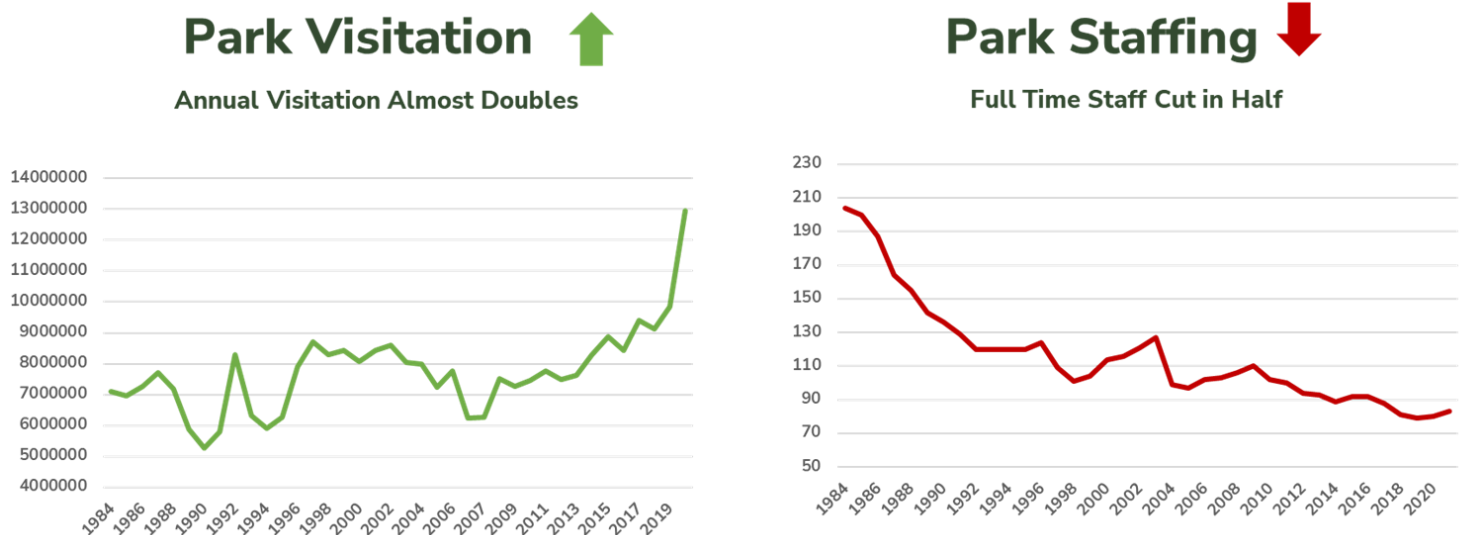
As you have heard from DEEP, there are over 1,000 structures, such as nature centers, bathrooms, historic buildings, and other facilities that make State Parks, Forests, and other public lands more welcoming to the public. DEEP has a backlog of over \$100 million in structural maintenance that has been accrued over many years. Dedicating \$25 million in ARPA funds to support State Park infrastructure is an excellent use of these funds, and would complement \$30 million in additional bonding proposed for Park infrastructure.

Keep Passport to the Parks Intact and Dedicated

Since 2018, the Passport to the Parks has helped stabilize the dramatic declines over time in the full-time maintenance personnel and seasonal workers who are so critical to maintain State Parks and keep them safe and accessible for the public. The Passport to the Parks remains intact in the budget adjustment, and we appreciate this Committee's support for allowing some reimbursement to the Passport to the Parks fund of seasonal worker benefits (e.g. retirement benefits) that are not used.

Although we strongly support the investments in park infrastructure and ongoing dedication to the Passport to the Parks, we remain concerned that the staff available to operate and maintain State Parks – currently limited to 83 FTE for 110 State Parks – is inadequate to sustain an acceptable level of service for visitors. In addition, the hourly rates for seasonal workers have remained capped at \$14/hour for seasonal park maintainers. As you know, this rate will be the State’s new minimum wage starting on July 1st, and being stuck at this level will make it near impossible for DEEP to effectively recruit and retain enough seasonal workers to keep the State Parks open and safe.

The following graphic should show you why we are concerned about the sustainability of staff-levels for State Parks, especially if this growing imbalance between increased attendance and diminished staff resources is allowed to continue:



Thank you for the important work you do, and for the opportunity to testify today on this bill.